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Public Counsel Smooths the Way

TALLAHASSEE— On July 20, the Florida Public Service adopted new procedures that will increase the eligibility guidelines used to provide Lifeline credits for Florida's low income telephone customers. The new procedures are designed to expand the number of Florida households that receive Lifeline assistance.

The PSC, with encouragement from Public Counsel Harold McLean and AARP, voted to immediately implement new rules that will provide Lifeline credits for those households that receive free lunches from the National School Lunch program. In addition, the Commission voted to qualify customers for the Lifeline credits if they have annual household income of less than 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

The Commission also adopted a streamlining proposal that allows a customer to self-certify their eligibility for the first tier of Lifeline credits, \$8.25 per month. In order to receive this credit, customers need only certify that they are participating in a state or federal program that is accepted for Lifeline qualification. When the customer subsequently provides paper proof of program participation, then the Lifeline credit will go up to a maximum of \$13.50 per month.

The telephone companies argued for delay in the implementation of the proposed changes, or outright denial. However, Public Counsel and AARP supported immediate implementation of the proposed changes and called for additional work on the part of all parties to improve Florida's Lifeline participation. McLean presented data that was developed by Deputy Public Counsel Charlie Beck showing that Florida has only enrolled only 13.7% of its low income subscriber households into the Lifeline program, significantly below the existing national average.

The new rules will take effect immediately, providing there is no formal appeal of the Commission's decision.

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